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HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH AND COLLEGE ENGLISH

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Whatever conclusions may be reached as to the opportunities and methods of articulation between high schools and colleges in the study of English should be based upon a careful consideration of their separate and their common aims, and of the machinery at the disposal of each to accomplish its aims. Any question of what may be accomplished in a given subject is a question, first of all, of what may be accomplished in any subject, in high school, and in college.

To begin with the high school, it has gone through a period of development out of which certain convictions of its normal purpose have logically arisen. There can be no doubt today that in the minds of the great majority the main purpose of the high school is not to prepare boys and girls for college. This view, moreover, has actually decided the function of the high school, which is to top elementary education with an education designed to render the individual both more useful to himself and society, and a better companion for his friends, his family, and—himself. The relative weight of these two clear functions, the useful and the decorative, is still so much a matter of agitated debate that it is safe to say no more than that the decorative is not generally held to be the predominating function. A high school, then, is generally taken to be an institution in which may be secured an education supplementary to, more mature than, more distinctively intellectual than, the elementary education, and an education sufficient and complete in its own aim. This education is not only *more* than the “grammar-school” student receives, it is *different*. Just how it is different, not everyone can say with accuracy or assurance.

The college bears somewhat the same relation to the high school. The education it offers is more, and is different. Just *how* it is different, it is hard to say.

If we attempt to decide quickly, however, what the precise aim of college education is, we find ourselves confronted by a much greater difference of opinion than affects and decides the function of high-school education. The high school has weathered the period of doubt upon this point, and utility seems to have come out the victor; and if we were to argue from the direction in which secondary education has developed, we should have to conclude that the college also will subordinate its refining influences to those of direct and absolutely tangible service to the community. But such a deduction might be incorrect, since the college touches a point in the student's life which needs more, and is more susceptible to, the influences of refinement, and since the tradition of "culture," with all its associations and implications, seems to be a very, very firm tradition. However this may be, the fact remains that there are today two views of college education, two views which are not as yet in anything like correct focus, and to one or the other of which most of us attach our faith. I am going to omit any reference to the view that college is a pleasant place in which to spend four years of wasteful leisure. The first and the older of these two views is that college is the home of the intellectual aristocracy, that its education is conservative in tendency, conforms to principle, and has a specific end—the production of the cultivated man. The second view is that the college is a market place of diverse learning, open to all to purchase and profit as their abilities may permit, turning out men with every form of equipment, but laying less emphasis, sometimes very little, upon that central item of equipment in the older education—a large and intellectual view of things.

To meet the first of these views, it was necessary for the colleges to require a preliminary education covering certain definite subjects which were to be carried farther in the college curriculum. An education of this sort could, in the nature of things, be regarded only as a preliminary education, and its sponsors regarded it largely in that light. The preparatory school was best fitted to give it, because it met the problem fairly and without apology. It turned out, however, that since the most efficient preparatory training had to be bought and paid for, the moneyed aristocracy, rather

than the intellectual aristocracy, gained admission within the college portals, there to lay its intellectual problems upon the shoulders of wearied instructors who worked in the conviction that the education they offered could do everybody some good and nobody any harm.

The second of these views has developed from the increasing demand for educational opportunity. It recognizes the high school as an institution with its own problems, of which that of preparing men for college is not first, and is, in fact, often incidental. Accepting the fact that the clearer aims of popular secondary education must determine the lines of its own development, it has endeavored to restore the continuous scheme of education, as between the secondary school and the college, by adjusting entrance requirements as far as possible to the facts and the opportunities in the newer situation. These adjustments have consisted principally in the increase in the number of entrance subjects, and more intelligent consideration of the matter and method of study of each single subject. Generally speaking, the concerted action of schools and colleges has given higher value to scientific branches, and has given language-study, both ancient and modern, greater elasticity and practicality. These newer policies may be regarded, in a way, as concessions to the idea of efficiency in education; but, although the stronger of the "old-line" colleges have revised their views as to the ultimate value of the smaller number of subjects through which they formerly tested their candidates' capacity, they have made no concession to the assumption that every man who has gone through high school is good enough to go on to college. In other words, they still employ the examination system, with its related machinery. In communities, on the other hand, in which the idea of completely democratized education has prevailed, the doors of state universities have been thrown open to high-school graduates, leaving the administration and the teaching staff to accommodate itself to, or to correct, deficiencies of training.

If our problem, now, dealt with the relations between preparatory school and old-line college, or between state high school and state university, there would be little to be discussed, for the

preparatory school still serves its purpose very adequately, and the state university is at any rate equipped with the means of handling its own problems. Upon this latter point there is something to be said, however, that is not strictly irrelevant. That is, that the financial waste entailed in carrying for a year or two a great number of insufficiently prepared students is one that could be borne only by a college supported by an open-handed democracy, and that, more important still, the quality of the education offered in such an institution must necessarily be affected adversely by these conditions. I shall not forget the hopeless tone in which a teacher in one of the first-rate middle-western universities—one which “takes care” of its students who are deficient in preparation—said to me: “You have no conception of the *impossibility* of the problem we handle.” Any question of preparation which concerns the so-called eastern universities, must ultimately concern the institutions supported by states, for when the latter confront the pressure for admission which the older colleges feel, they must take effective means to see that entrance requirements have been adequately met *before* a candidate is admitted. The basic idea of democratic education is efficiency, and no project grounded in the idea of efficiency can support indefinitely the waste of time, money, and energy that is connected with the assimilation of badly prepared students.

Let us return, then, to the problem confronting us: the relations between the public high school and the college which establishes and maintains the level of its first-year and subsequent work by a system of examinations. By its position such a college might refuse to meet this problem. Its educational offering, its traditions, its social advantages, all combine to give it a special place in our educational scheme which makes it favored by ambitious students of all ranks. It does not go into the market place for students; its problem is to choose the best of the very large supply of human material that is offered to it—the best in every sense. In days now not very far removed, when every candidate for college had substantially the same end in view that all his compeers had, the college could set a definite task of preparation, consisting largely of a prescribed program of work, for the testing of

individual quality; but with the development of a free and liberal high-school system, the college turned to a really intellectual test rather than one of memory, a test which all students might meet without unreasonable difficulty or special disadvantage. The rationalizing of the examination system, which has been going on rapidly for twenty years, has finally reached the point where a series of alternative examinations with less limited subject-matter is offered to students and teachers who recognize the fact that the educational end is more important than the means designed to effect it. This change of view, however, has not in the least affected the employment of the examination system as the primary means of determining intellectual fitness for work of collegiate character. Upon the question of what a student should know before entering college there is always opportunity, and sometimes need, for a change of view; but if there is change of view upon the question of the necessary quality of a candidate's equipment and the degree of his intellectual maturity, that change is all in favor of the college, and will become more so. The final factor in the determination of this question is always economic. While the number of candidates for entrance to college is increasing from year to year, the colleges must, by the nature of the case, continue to apply increasingly stringent intellectual tests.

In English literature these tests have been gradually working away from stereotyped preparation, through the broadening of the list of elective readings and the discarding of questions designed merely to squeeze information from a saturated brain. A reading-list accommodated, as ours has been, to the idea of intensive study of specific works, however, scarcely admits of elastic teaching, or of a liberal examination policy. But with the installation of the revised requirements and plan of examination adopted by the National Conference this year, which are to go into effect in 1920, a really new and broad field of possibilities is opened to the teacher who would see some sensible relation between a course in literature ideal for the high-school student spending his last years in the acquisition of what should be a broad and complete literary education, and a course covering the field of literature in such a way as to give the candidate for college effectual access to

literary ideas. As to the greater merits of the Comprehensive Examination, its better adjustment to the necessities of high-school teaching, and its elimination of the special advantages which the preparatory school has exploited, there can be no question in the mind of the intelligent teacher. There is retained in the new scheme, to be sure, an alternative Restricted Examination, with an even narrower list of prescriptions than the present one, but its appeal is clearly directed to the teacher and student to whom the minimizing of effort and the saving of time are large considerations.

So much for the newer, fairer, and in every way better, type of examination. Then how does it serve, in comparison with the older type, to articulate college work in literature with high-school work? With the old scheme the Freshman came to college with a certain amount of literary information, but with little intelligent sense of the end—much less of the possibilities—of literary study. The college practically never used the new student's previous work in high school as a point of departure, for experience generally developed the fact that his knowledge embraced only a few literary figures and a handful of literary definitions. Today the college instructor should be able to count on some literary point of view and an appreciation of literary values not dried up by the application of the methods of mathematical teaching. The newer form of examination, then, certainly forms an actual point of contact between school and college work. It ought not to be necessary now to scrap the results of the high-school instructor's work at the very beginning of the college student's course in literature.

Upon the subject of composition the Conference has reaffirmed the principles which have been maintained consistently by the colleges. Composition is not merely an aspect of language-study; it is—let us as teachers of English say it with as much modesty as we can command—the most direct and most available index of general intelligence in the school or college curriculum. The professor who asserted years ago that he would be willing to accept or reject a candidate for entrance upon his showing in spoken and written English was not wholly unreasonable. The representative of an entrance committee who acknowledged that he decided his doubtful cases largely in the light of the results in English and

mathematics would scarcely be criticized for bad judgment. Possessing, as it does, this wide relation to the question of a student's general preparation, the subject of composition cannot be taken too seriously by high-school teachers, and cannot be scrutinized too carefully by college examiners. Let us look briefly and honestly then at its possibilities for the teacher in the secondary school, and its actual importance in the eyes of the examiner.

In the first place, we confront the fact that the teaching of composition presents the closest possible connection with the needs of everyday life, and is also the basis of the fine art which is most nearly within the range of everyday intelligence and cultivation. For this reason, from the very beginning of our study in this field in the elementary school, the useful and the aesthetic ends of study are, and should be, held constantly in view. The elements of aesthetic interest, however, since they are so much more enjoyable for teacher and student, tend to obscure the necessity of developing a mechanical (yes, mechanical—let's say it frankly) correctness which not merely serves a useful purpose, but which is the basis of the technique of the art. It is not necessary to go at this development as if it could be finished up completely at the very outset: we no longer embark upon the study of Latin with only a grammar and a dictionary. But it is necessary to accept the obligation constantly as a matter of conscience, and to work consistently and untiringly upon the desideratum of good, honest workmanship. To take a comparison from the teaching of the mechanical arts, we may encourage a boy's invention by letting him make bungled furniture rather than boxes, at the initial stage of his work in carpentry; but we can't afford to let him continue to bungle if we expect to see him reach actual accomplishment. We let his science and his art grow up together; we do not let his art outgrow his science, for the cabinet-maker must be first of all a carpenter. So in our teaching of composition, we cannot take it for granted at any point in a scholar's career that he is free from the need of being called to account for his carelessness or bad workmanship. There are two aspects to the question, the disciplinary and the cultural, but either one is sufficient to indicate an ever-present need of correction in matters of mechanical detail. If

the high-school teacher finds that the elementary-school teacher has slighted his obligations upon this point, still less is he warranted in slighting his own.

We all remember Gibbon's observation that "style is the image of character." It is true no less—perhaps still more—of the more elemental attainments in composition. The teaching of composition is simply assistance in the slow but progressive formation of habit. Whether that habit is careful or careless, precise or slovenly, blind or perceptive, depends largely upon the pains which any and every teacher is willing to take with a student. Sins of omission are here not merely sins of omission; for a teacher who repudiates his part in the fostering of good habits in writing actually undoes the work of his predecessors. If a boy goes on to college after such careless training, the college instructor cannot mend his bad habits in a year, even though he has superior machinery and better opportunity for the accomplishment of this end.

There is still another aspect of the matter, however, which has nothing to do with the question of the "division of labor" between high-school teacher and college teacher. If the boy in question does not go on to college, he is simply turned loose, as a high-school graduate, "with all his crimes broad blown." In no other intellectually advanced country except America could the proposition that a man understands his language when he cannot write it with correctness find a moment's acceptance. It is inconceivable that in France or in Germany fundamental defects in language should be slighted because they are defects of "merely mechanical detail."

"But," it may be answered, "our problem in the high school is simply a part of the problem of assimilating a foreign population. You can't make a silk purse—well, you know what I mean: it simply can't be done."

Admitted! It can't. But what connection has that with a teacher's deciding whether or not a foreign student at a given point in his career can or cannot write English? A year or two ago I had occasion to protest against a passing-grade reported by the New York State Board of Regents for an Italian student who

was found after he entered college on his "Regents' Certificate" to be grossly illiterate. After re-examination of the student's paper the representative of the Board owned the soft impeachment, but asked, "What can you expect of a man who is obviously a foreigner?" The question can be answered by asking another. What shall one think of a teacher or an examiner who assumes that the only way to deal with such a student is to tell him, and the entrance committee of the college he wishes to attend, that he can write English, when it is grossly and ridiculously untrue? The problem of dealing sympathetically with a foreigner who shows capacity to carry a college curriculum, even though his command of English is uncertain, is one that can be met intelligently by an admission committee; but it is preposterous that his command of English should be misrepresented simply because his earnestness deserves better than it has attained.

As a matter of fact, however, foreigners do not furnish a disproportionate number of cases of illiteracy. And here we come back to our first question. Are we to teach a high-school boy to write *his own* language correctly? Is the demand which the college examiner imposes an arbitrary demand? It has been said to be. Is it unreasonable, though, to ask that a man in his seventeenth year, after ten or twelve years of schooling, shall be able to distinguish between a comma and a period, or to avoid spelling "believe" with an *ei*, or "disappoint" with two *s*'s? And is this question one of anything but plain utility? Let the "business man," since we are going to let him decide for us what constitutes a "useful" education, answer the question for us. He laughs at his stenographer and his clerk, who have been through high school, because they cannot spell better than he.

The problem of congestion and the problem of the foreigner are both irrelevant to the basic question: What is good English? Let us admit that the Hopkins report shows the extreme difficulty of teaching English as it might be taught in a New York high school. Does this affect the question whether or not an individual student has the capacity that should entitle him to promotion from one class into the next higher? The New York State Regents' syllabus, for example, proposes that a pupil should not be advanced

to the second class if he still has the "comma fault," and that a student should not be advanced into the third class if he is unable to construct fairly satisfactory paragraphs. Here, then, is a recommendation which not only permits, but urges, the teacher to hold back a student whose mechanical execution is bad; yet the College Entrance Board's harvest of comma sentences goes on from year to year among the *graduates*—not the first-year students—of these schools. The situation is simple; the teacher is confronted with a definite standard which would indicate for the student something like his real competency; yet apparently the teacher prefers to give the student a totally false impression of his attainment rather than risk condemnation if he reacts honestly to the standard proposed. This is no "college-entrance" standard, either, but one which has in view the "public usefulness" of the high school.

My conclusion is this: that it is impossible to make a reasonable distinction between college-entrance requirements in composition and the useful equipment of any fairly educated young man or woman. All matters of "broader interest," of school journalism, of short-story writing and the hundred-odd diversions of the teacher of composition, are important only as far as they develop the ability of the student to write his language respectably.

Not many weeks ago I sat in an audience before which a young man stood holding aloft a pamphlet of which I had been the modest compiler. The pamphlet consisted of a series of "Dont's." Its aim was to reveal to students a large number of careless, unintelligent, and often inane errors which would never have confronted the sight of college examiners if these students had been properly brought to recognize elemental defects. "What educational idea," he asked—"what educational idea is there in this?" The "educational idea" is a simple one. It is that it is not possible for a man to be educated—and, at the same time, illiterate.